

# Understanding Belgium's engagement in Libya

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March 28, 2011

**Frank Gerits** on the latest nuances of Belgian foreign policy.....



A wave of revolutions is spreading like wildfire throughout the Arabic world which is remarkable and undeniably historic. What intrigues even more is Europe's position in this change, with the recent introduction of a weapon embargo and no-fly zone in Libya. The 'west' has realized rather late that it has an important stake in shaping the democratization process, based on the reasoning that the existence of similar societies is advantageous for Europe's foreign policy interests. While the French and American motives are reasonably well understood, the reasons behind Belgium's engagement are not openly questioned or analyzed. Parliament almost unanimously approved the country's commitment (0 against, 125 for and 1 abstention), justifying Belgian participation as an act to protect human rights.

Why did Belgium become part of the coalition of the willing by offering six F16 jets and one mine-sweeper? The answer is multifaceted and complex. The human rights argument is clearly an important factor for a small country as Belgium that bases its foreign policy on democratic values, for instance towards the Congo. But this does not explain why a country that prefers to stay out of wars – no involvement in first and second Gulf War, Afghanistan or Iraq, and the policy guideline of the Rwanda doctrine that states that no military personnel will be deployed to former colonies – was so fast to decide on participation in a conflict that Germany stays out of and that does not have a clear command structure or goal?

The answer lies in the specific circumstances that have facilitated the implementation of a fundamental line for Belgian foreign policy, a line that I draw in my own ongoing research on Belgian Cold War diplomacy. During the Cold War, Belgium focused on building a reputation as a reliable 'go between', not out of a sense of altruism or to gain more stability in the international system to sell more goods and services. It wanted to build a reliable reputation to set the agenda, in effect gaining a form of power. The decision on Libya is rooted in this fundamental driver. The policy to reach this goal is facilitated by internal and external factors that explain the fast pace of decision making.

Belgium's adherence to a specific form of multilateralism, which I call 'European Atlanticism', is a first external factor. The principal actors fit in this scheme. France took the

lead in this operation in agreement with the Americans. The operation is furthermore backed up by a broad U.N. resolution giving it international legitimacy and making 'international law' one of the most quoted words during the parliamentary debate. The conflict furthermore takes the form of an air operation, giving it the outlook of a rather low-risk undertaking out of which the country can easily withdraw.

Even more important than the beneficial international environment are the domestic factors. Because of the government formation crisis, Belgium is ruled by a temporary government. Elections are far away – everybody knows they would not solve the problem – and ministers have a lot of room to act because they are not fully checked by parliament. Belgian participation furthermore offers a desperately needed gesture of unity in a country hopelessly divided between language groups.

Lastly, there is the weighty factor of personalities. Prime minister Leterme needs a reputation boost after his political career took the form of a Greek tragedy. More important is the minister of defense, Pieter De Crem, also known as 'Crembo'. His policy is aimed at making the Belgian army small and agile, easy to dispatch all over the globe for peace keeping and other operations. It is his response to the post-Cold War decline of the Belgian Army. The question remains open if these premises on which the decisions were taken are correct. Can Belgium easily withdraw from the conflict if it goes wrong? Should Belgium participate in an operation that wants to eliminate Khadaffi? What if the protection of human rights becomes a long term commitment? These are highly problematic issues that are not answered.

Why is Belgium's decision to participate in the 'coalition of the willing' not questioned by the public? There are two main reasons. There is first of all, the haze of secrecy that surrounds foreign affairs and defense in Belgium. People (even professional observers) simply do not know what Belgium's foreign policy is, making it difficult to evaluate Belgium's engagement in Libya. Parliament was for instance informed about the fact that Belgian soldiers had responded to enemy fire in Afghanistan, but they did not inform the public. Despite the fact that this was problematic – Belgian soldiers are there merely to train the Afghan military – the parliamentarians did not feel the need to communicate this news. Only after an amateur recording of combatants in Afghanistan became public did official statements pour out and a camera crew was allowed, with strict restrictions, to film the Belgian forces. Furthermore, Belgian foreign affairs archives are willfully underfunded and unorganized to make historical research as difficult as possible, notwithstanding the hard work of the staff. By contrast, in the Dutch archives there are clear rules for de-classification and the obligation to deposit documents coming from foreign affairs in the National Archives. While the Netherlands is a small country too, where there is consequently not as much interest for foreign policy, there is more openness and debate about Dutch foreign policy. The fall of Dutch governments over Sebrenica and Afghanistan are examples of this. It is therefore a false argument to state that Belgium is a small country and its population thus not concerned with foreign policy. This uncritical stance is highly problematic especially because it is unclear what the ultimate goal is of the war in Libya and because a British Expeditionary Force has also landed on Libyan shores to enforce the no fly zone, giving the 'no ground troops' provision in the resolution a flexible interpretation.

Considering the expertise of the [Belgian special forces](#) (the only division of the Belgian army that is properly funded), some sort of cooperation is not as improbable as it may seem at first glance. Sending 'advisors' or the like is one of the oldest tricks in the book. Despite public statements to the contrary, the 'rules of engagement' are far from clear because the goal of the

military intervention is far from clear. That is why the Belgian intervention in Libya merits our closest attention.

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